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# The Integration of the Hispanic/Latino Immigrant Workforce State of Nebraska Mexican American Commission Project Report

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# **The Integration of the Hispanic/Latino Immigrant Workforce**

## **Final Project Report**

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Submitted to:

State of Nebraska Mexican American Commission

and

Task Force on the Productive Integration of the Immigrant Workforce Population

Senator Matt Connealy – Co-Chair  
Cecilia Olivarez Huerta – Co-Chair  
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May 31, 2002

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# **The Integration of the Hispanic/Latino Immigrant Workforce**

## **Final Project Report**

### **Table of Contents**

#### **I. Introduction**

1. Background of the Study.....1
2. Purpose and Methodology.....1
3. Theoretical Assumptions and Guiding Research.....1

#### **II. The Latino Population and Workforce**

1. Demographic Transformations.....3
2. Age and Fertility: Contributions to Growth.....7
3. Diversity within the Latino Population.....7
4. Re-populating Rural Communities.....9
5. Socio-economic Indicators of Integration.....9
6. Summary: Socio-Demographic Changes and Integration.....12

#### **III. Mail Questionnaire Survey**

1. Methods.....14
2. Community Size and Types of Agencies/Organizations.....14
3. Latino-serving Agencies and Employers of Latinos.....16
4. Hispanic/Latino Immigrants as Community Assets.....16
5. Challenges and Barriers to Integration.....18
6. Community Success at Integration of Latino Immigrants.....21
7. Optimism for Agency Contributions to Latino Integration.....22
8. Optimism and City Size.....23
9. Summary: Mail Questionnaires.....24

#### **IV. Focus Groups**

1. Methods.....25
2. Results.....25
3. Summary: Focus Groups.....32

#### **V. Conclusion and Recommendations**

1. Summary.....33
2. Policy Recommendations.....35

#### **VI. References**

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# **I. INTRODUCTION**

## **1. Background of the Study**

In January 2000 *Legislative Bill 1363* was introduced into the Nebraska legislature by a group of seventeen state senators led by Senator Matt Connealy. The purpose of *LB 1363* was to create the *Task Force on the Productive Integration of the Immigrant Workforce Population*. The bill was passed by the Nebraska legislature and signed by Governor Johanns in April 2000. One of the primary directives for the newly established task force was to “investigate current statutes and practices of the state and local government regarding the access and use of human services provided to the immigrant workforce in Nebraska, but not limited to: education, housing, transportation, justice system, and health services.” (Legislature of Nebraska 2000). As part of its initiative the *Task Force* held a series of public hearings which gave individual citizens across the state an opportunity to express their views and ideas about the opportunities and challenges ‘oldtimers’ and new arrivals to Nebraska face as a result of an increasing immigrant workforce population in the state and their respective communities. The second component of the research initiative was to sponsor a research study on this same topic. We were subsequently selected by the State of Nebraska Mexican American Commission to conduct such a study, the results of which will be discussed shortly.

## **2. Purpose and Methodology**

The main purpose of the study was to explore the degree to which Latino newcomers are being effectively and positively integrated into the economic, social, and political lives and institutions of the state and local communities. The project consisted of three phases. The first was based on the analysis of recent releases of Census 2000 figures as well as other government documents, media archives, and published research. We utilized this information primarily to construct a general, albeit partial, demographic and socio-economic profile of Nebraska’s Latino immigrant and native-born population and workforce. The second phase was the development of a survey questionnaire mailed to a wide array of agencies and organizations directly or indirectly charged with the process of integrating newcomer populations. In the third phase we conducted focus groups with newcomers and key organizations in three Nebraska communities. These last two phases are described in more detail later in the report. This project represents an important step on the part of state institutions to address the serious dearth of research on the state’s Latino population. Our findings, however, must be interpreted with some caution as the data are still insufficient. Additionally, it is too early in the process to arrive at definitive conclusions or accurately predict the direction that integration for Latino newcomers and their children will take and the speed at which it will occur.

## **3. Theoretical Assumptions and Guiding Research**

The research process was informed by a vast body of national and regional research on immigrant incorporation processes conducted by nationally recognized scholars. Among some of the most important insights we gleaned from this body of research are:

- The productive incorporation of new immigrants and their children has never been as simple, linear, and predictable as popular and nostalgic tales, based largely on earlier European immigrants' assimilation trajectories, seem to suggest.
- It is largely true that, in time, all immigrants assimilate into American society. In fact, research continues to show that even newly arrived children of immigrants prefer to speak English within a year of attending school in the U.S. and it is the native language and culture that are soon lost. However, to which social and economic segment of American society, and with what level of difficulty or success, immigrants will assimilate will vary greatly depending on a combination of factors. Critical among such factors are the reservoir of human and *social capital*<sup>1</sup> contained in newcomer communities and, perhaps more importantly, the social and economic barriers newcomers confront on their road to successful integration.
- Large national studies have convincingly demonstrated that one of the most important components of a positive "context of reception" has to do with the receiving governments' laws and policies.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that these policies promote inclusion rather than passive acceptance or outright exclusion, immigrant workers and their children are most likely to commit to, as well as experience, a positive, productive, and long-term process of incorporation into their host communities and societies.
- Other factors shaping the incorporation process include the degree to which host communities welcome diversity and provide economic and social opportunities for newcomers and the political and economic strength of the more established ethnic community.
- Research on the so-called "second generation" (children of immigrants born in the United States) provides strong evidence for the thesis that, when these children and their parents experience a hostile context of reception, framed in large part by low wages and adverse policy and cultural environments, time actually diminishes the original immigrant drive and has a negative impact on children's adaptation process.
- Assimilation is thus a segmented process and, lacking access to the key institutions of society and mechanisms that reinforce a strong sense of identity, children of immigrants will assimilate into the lower and most socially troubled segments of our societies. In this manner their contributions to the future of these societies, whether at the national, state or local level, are effectively undermined.

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<sup>1</sup> *Social capital* is defined as "the ability to gain access to needed resources by virtue of membership in social networks" as well as in societal institutions of various kinds (Portes and Rumbaut 2001: 313)

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Alejandro Portes and Ruben Rumbaut, 2001. *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Also, Michael Fix and Wendy Zimmermann, 2000. "The Integration of Immigrant Families," Washington DC: The Urban Institute (June).

- In sum, positive integration is always a two-way process and its effectiveness is not simply determined by what immigrants bring with them in the way of human capital. On the contrary, it is the extent to which newcomers encounter a welcoming economic, social and political environment that is most determining of successful integration and assimilation.

## **II. The Latino Population and Workforce**

### **1. Demographic Transformations**

Much of the focus on immigrant populations in the United States is fueled by the demographic changes that have occurred during the past two decades. One need only review the dramatic growth of the Hispanic/Latino population in the U.S. to recognize these changes and their tremendous social, economic and political impacts. Whereas the overall population in the United State increased by slightly more than 13% in the decade between 1990 and 2000, the Hispanic/Latino population increased 58% during that same period reaching a population totaling approximately 35+ million people. This unprecedented growth did not just occur in those regions where Hispanics/Latinos have traditionally been found, e.g. California, Florida and Texas. To the surprise of many demographers, major surges in growth were found in what are being called “new destinations” in regions such as the South where states such as Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama, Arkansas and others experienced record growths in their Latino population. North Carolina, a new destination state, had the greatest growth proportionately, with its Hispanic/Latino population increasing by nearly 400 percent in the past decade.

Table 1 provides a glimpse of how Great Plains states were also beneficiaries of these immigration patterns. The overall population increases in each of these states was well below the national average of 12.4 % ranging from .5% to 8.9 %. However, the Hispanic/Latino percentage change far exceeded the overall population change in all of the states. In all cases, states would have had little or no growth had it not been for the increase of their Latino populations in the past decade. Kansas and Missouri experienced nearly 100 percent growth in their Latino population and Nebraska and Iowa ranked even higher among the ten states experiencing the largest Latino population growth between the last two decennial censuses (US Census 2000). A common denominator underpinning these demographic changes and migration toward new destinations has been their relationship to the restructuring and revitalization of industries such as meat and poultry processing.<sup>3</sup> This has been a particularly important factor in Nebraska, a state whose Latino population growth exceeded all others listed in Table 1. (Gouveia and Saenz 2000; Hernandez and Zuñiga 2002). We discuss these trends below in more detail.

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the combination of global and regional forces shaping the formation of recent migratory streams toward the Midwest and the Great Plains, see Gouveia and Saenz (2000).



**TABLE 1. Growth and Percentage Change for Total Population and Hispanic/Latino Population for Selected Northern Plains States, 1990 and 2000**

	1990		2000		% Change 1990-2000	
State	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population
Iowa	2,776,755	32,647	2,926,324	82,473	5.4	152.6
Kansas	2,477,574	93,670	2,688,418	188,252	8.5	101.0
Missouri	5,117,073	61,702	5,595,211	118,592	9.3	92.2
Nebraska	1,578,385	36,969	1,711,263	94,425	8.4	155.4
North Dakota	638,800	4,472	642,200	7,786	.5	74.1
South Dakota	696,004	5,568	754,844	10,903	8.5	95.8

**Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2**

From 1990 to 2000 Nebraska experienced dramatic changes in its Hispanic/Latino population (Carranza et al. 2000). According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, the Hispanic/Latino population increased more than 155%, going from 36,969 to 94,425. Tables 2 and 3 provide a glimpse at the changes that have occurred in Nebraska counties and cities in the past decade according to U.S. Census figures. Table 2 lists the 15 counties that recorded the largest Hispanic/Latino populations in 2002. Most of these counties had small to moderate growths in population. However, one-third of the counties had increases of 17% or greater, with Dawson and Dakota counties reflecting the largest percentage increase in total population. When viewing the percentage change in the Hispanic/Latino population, it is clear this population had significant increases in all of the counties and helped contribute to the overall positive population growth that occurred in these counties. This remains true even in counties like Box Butte, which had a slight decrease in total population, yet still had almost a 29% increase in its Hispanic/Latino population. In looking at Table 3, the comparison of percentage change from 1990 to 2000 between the total population and the Hispanic/Latino population is even more dramatic. Overall, for these cities the Hispanic/Latino population growth has significantly contributed to the changes occurring within the total population. Again, this occurrence holds true even in a community such as Gering, which had a 2.5% *decrease* in overall population, yet still had an increase of more than 10% in their Hispanic/Latino population. It should be noted these figures do not take into account persistent problems of undercounting groups, such as Hispanics/Latinos, particularly undocumented immigrants and their families.

**TABLE 2 - Growth and Percentage Change for Total Population and  
Hispanic/Latino Population for Selected Nebraska Counties, 1990 and 2000**

	<b>1990</b>		<b>2000</b>		<b>% Change 1990-2000</b>	
<b>Counties</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Hispanic/ Latino Population</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Hispanic/ Latino Population</b>	<b>Total Population</b>	<b>Hispanic/ Latino Population</b>
<b>Douglas</b>	416,444	11,368	463,585	30,928	11.3	172.1
<b>Lancaster</b>	213,641	3,938	250,291	8,437	17.2	114.2
<b>Hall*</b>	48,925	2,116	53,534	7,497	9.4	254.3
<b>Scotts Bluff*</b>	36,025	5,237	36,951	6,352	2.6	21.3
<b>Dawson*</b>	19,940	663	24,365	6,178	22.2	831.8
<b>Sarpy</b>	102,583	3,383	122,595	5,538	19.5	58.4
<b>Dakota</b>	16,742	1,016	20,253	4,581	21.0	350.9
<b>Madison*</b>	32,655	569	35,226	3,042	7.9	434.6
<b>Colfax*</b>	9,139	224	10,441	2,732	14.2	1119.6
<b>Platte*</b>	29,820	255	31,662	2,072	6.2	712.5
<b>Buffalo*</b>	37,447	1,023	42,259	1,970	12.8	92.6
<b>Lincoln*</b>	32,508	1,623	34,632	1,880	6.5	15.8
<b>Adams*</b>	29,625	303	31,151	1,428	5.2	371.3
<b>Dodge*</b>	34,500	223	36,160	1,421	4.8	537.2
<b>Box Butte*</b>	13,130	722	12,158	930	- 7.4	28.8

\* Indicates non-metropolitan counties

**Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171)  
Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2**

**TABLE 3. Growth and Percentage Change for Total Population and Hispanic/Latino Population for Selected Nebraska Cities, 1990 and 2000**

	1990		2000		% Change 1990-2000	
Cities	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population	Total Population	Hispanic/Latino Population
Omaha	335,719	10,288	390,007	29,397	16.2	185.7
Lincoln	191,972	3,764	225,581	8,154	17.5	116.6
Grand Island*	39,386	1,887	42,940	6,845	9.0	262.7
Lexington*	6,601	329	10,011	5,121	51.6	1456.5
Scottsbluff*	13,711	2,720	14,732	3,476	7.4	27.8
S Sioux City	9,677	545	11,925	2,958	23.2	442.8
Bellevue	30,928	1,213	44,382	2,609	43.5	115.1
Schuyler*	4,052	164	5,371	2,423	32.6	1377.4
Norfolk*	21,476	299	23,516	1,790	9.5	498.7
North Platte*	22,605	1,355	23,878	1,596	5.6	17.8
Columbus*	19,480	167	20,971	1,395	7.7	735.3
Hastings*	22,837	268	24,064	1,343	5.4	401.1
Kearney*	24,396	667	27,431	1,118	12.4	67.6
Fremont*	23,680	165	25,174	1,085	6.3	557.6
Gering*	7,946	944	7,751	1,039	- 2.5	10.1

\* Indicates cities located in non-metropolitan counties

**Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Redistricting Data (Public Law 94-171) Summary File, Matrices PL1 and PL2.**

There are no adequate means to calculate the precise number of undocumented workers and their families living in the United States or Nebraska. Omaha's district office for the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) initially estimated that about 25% of the meatpacking labor force in Nebraska was undocumented. Its subsequent review of the entire industry's employment records did not confirm such a high estimate, albeit it did not totally disprove it either (INS Task Force 2000). Nationally, estimates are similar to the local INS estimates. They range from a low of 5.9 million to a high of 9.9 million, with a midrange of nearly 8 million, or about 25% of the estimated foreign-born population (Lowell and Suro 2002). Our own field experiences suggest numbers can vary depending on periods of low or aggressive labor recruitment by employers (who

may or may not be specifically targeting undocumented workers) and time of arrival of particular migration streams. Such estimates may range from a low of 10% or 15% to a high of 25 or 30% in different communities and at different times.

## **2. Age and Fertility: Contributions to Growth**

While the majority of the Latino population growth between 1990 and 2000 was due to immigration, additional factors contributing to these demographic trends were age and fertility. Nationally, the Hispanic/Latino population has a median age of 25.9 years as compared to the total population's 35.3 years—about a nine-year difference. The difference between whites and Latinos is more dramatic in the new destination states such as Nebraska. Here, the Latino median age is 13 years below that of non-Latino white median age. Similarly, the state's crude birth rate was 14.4 live births per 1,000 population in 2000, while the Hispanic population's birth rate was more than twice that (about 30 live births per 1,000 which is the same as the national rate). The city of Lexington, where Latinos are now a majority, recorded the highest birth rate among communities with a population of at least 2,500 (25.9 total birth rate) (Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services 2001).

Latinos' higher birth rate has particularly broad implications for schools, where there will be a higher proportion of these children in our Pre K-12 classrooms. In fact, recent figures from the Nebraska Department of Education show that the number of Hispanic children enrolled in Pre K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in Nebraska schools increased from 7,147 in 1990-1991 to 20,659 in 2000-2001; a nearly 300% increase. For example, in the communities of Lexington and Schuyler, Latino children constitute 64% and 65% respectively in these school districts (Nebraska Department of Education, 2001). If we narrow the focus only to the elementary-level (grades K-6) then the numbers and percentages are even more pronounced. Lexington again is illustrative. According to the School Superintendent, Dick Eisenhauer, 80% of the children enrolled in Kindergarten in 2002 were Hispanic (Knapple Olson 2002). It is this second generation that will shape the future character of these communities.

## **3. Diversity within the Latino Population**

An additional dimension to the growing Hispanic/Latino population in Nebraska is the group's increasing diversity based on country of origin. Table 4 illustrates the numerous diverse number of countries from which the Latino population originates. Historically, immigrants of Mexican origin have constituted the greater part of the Latino population, and clearly they remain the majority of Nebraska's Hispanic/Latino population (75.2%). Nonetheless, the figures from the 2000 Census indicate a sizeable increase in the "Other Hispanic or Latino" category, which now comprises almost 22% of the state's Hispanic/Latino population.

**TABLE 4. Hispanic or Latino Origin for Nebraska, 2000.**

	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>TOTAL POPULATION</b>	1,711,263	100.0
Not Hispanic or Latino	1,616,838	94.5
Hispanic or Latino (of any race)	94,425	5.5
<b>HISPANIC OR LATINO BY TYPE</b>	94,425	100.0
<b>Mexican</b>	71,030	75.2
<b>Puerto Rican</b>	1,993	2.1
<b>Cuban</b>	859	0.9
<b>Other Hispanic or Latino</b>	20,543	21.8
<i>Dominican (Dominican Republic)</i>	129	0.1
Central American (excludes Mexican)	5,270	5.6
<i>Costa Rican</i>	67	0.1
<i>Guatemalan</i>	2,508	2.7
<i>Honduran</i>	476	0.5
<i>Nicaraguan</i>	116	0.1
<i>Panamanian</i>	232	0.2
<i>Salvadoran</i>	1,626	1.7
<i>Other Central American</i>	245	0.3
South American	1,197	1.3
<i>Argentinean</i>	79	0.1
<i>Bolivian</i>	47	---
<i>Chilean</i>	130	0.1
<i>Colombian</i>	397	0.4
<i>Ecuadorian</i>	77	0.1
<i>Paraguayan</i>	9	---
<i>Peruvian</i>	241	0.3
<i>Uruguayan</i>	7	---
<i>Venezuelan</i>	157	0.2
<i>Other South American</i>	53	0.1
Spaniard	180	0.2
All Other Hispanic or Latino	13,767	14.6

**Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000, Summary File 1 and unpublished data. Internet Release Date: October 22, 2001.**

In Nebraska, foreign-born immigrants from Central and Latin America, together with their U.S. children, the so-called “immigrant-stock” population, make up the bulk of the new Latino population. According to the 2000 census, there are 39,991 Nebraska foreign-born from Latin America, or about 42% of the total Hispanic population. Census 2000 data on the number of Nebraska children born to Latino immigrant parents is not yet available. However, it is safe to say that they will elevate the percentage of

immigrant-stock Latinos considerably above those who consider themselves third or fourth generation Latinos or, for that matter, pioneer Hispanic (primarily Mexican) settlers of the United States. This contrasts sharply with 1990 when only about 16% percent of the Latino population was foreign-born. Mirroring national trends, in 1990, the majority of Nebraska's foreign-born came from Europe (about 38%) and only 22% came from Latin America, today nearly 54% come from Latin America and only 14.5% come from Europe. Asians are the second-largest foreign-born population with 25.7%. Positive international migration actually offset the state's negative domestic in-migration in recent years. The majority of these new immigrants are also young and thus important replenishments to the state's dwindling workforce (Nebraska Department of Economic Development 2000).

#### **4. Re-Populating Rural Communities**

A final point about the demographic shift that has occurred in the last ten years has to do with the large number of Latinos who have settled in Nebraska's rural counties and small towns between 1990 and today. Nearly half of the total Hispanic/Latino population as enumerated by the 2000 Census today live in communities of less than 25,000 people and new Latino immigrants have settled primarily in non-metropolitan counties. As Tables 1 and 2 indicate, Hispanic population growth in these counties far outpaced that of metropolitan counties. Latinos have settled, not in the smallest, but in the mid-size communities of these non-metropolitan counties (those with cities of at least 8,000 population), where meatpacking plants and other immigrant labor-dependent industries have also relocated or expanded (Deichert 2001; Tiennessen 2001). Not surprisingly, as we will discuss later, it is from these cities that we obtained the largest number of survey responses; attesting perhaps to their heightened awareness about the presence of immigrants and the need to positively integrate this newcomer population.

#### **5. Socio-Economic Indicators of Integration**

Unfortunately, much of the data necessary to construct a complete and accurate socio-economic profile of Latino newcomers are not readily available. We have made an effort to define or infer additional characteristics of the Latino oldtimer and newcomer populations from published research and other data sources. Nor is it always possible to differentiate clearly between older generations and more recent arrivals. Subsequent Census 2000 releases and analyses will make significant contributions to filling this data void. We will be producing additional publications based on such releases and additional research.

Despite these difficulties, we are confident that the following trends accurately reflect key socio-economic characteristics of the Latino population. Interpreted against the backdrop of the national research findings outlined earlier, these trends contain ample warning signs of the barriers newcomers may confront as they proceed in their journey to successful adaptation. They also reveal potential sources of knowledge and skills, which, through enlightened policies, can be deployed in the service of this integration process and the citizens of Nebraska as a whole.

- *Oldtimers' Socio-economic Status and Social Capital.* Census data suggest that, not unlike today and despite high rates of labor force participation, Latino oldtimers in Nebraska have tended to concentrate in “blue collar” jobs, have higher poverty rates, lower rates of home ownership, and lower median incomes than non-Latino whites. In 1990, half as many Latinos as non-Latino whites had completed college degrees (Bureau of Business Research 1997). Nevertheless, there is a visible, though relatively small, middle class of Latino oldtimers made up of professionals who have completed some college (about an equal number of Latinos and non-Latino whites had completed associates degrees in 1990). Latinos in Nebraska also slightly surpassed the national average for Latinos with a college degree. Finally, this population has maintained strong ties to their historic, primarily Mexican, roots and a strong sense of collective responsibility and community solidarity (Lopez 2000). This speaks well for the *social capital* contained in the larger Latino community and, thus for newcomers’ chances for positive integration.
- *Employment and Newcomers.* Nebraska in general suffers from a deficit of middle and higher-wage jobs. Wages and benefits in industries such as meatpacking or construction, where Latino newcomers are heavily represented, are insufficient springboards toward meaningful economic advancement. Our research, for example, as well as periodic industry reports, has consistently shown that these newcomers typically make up between 50 and 80 percent of a meatpacking plant’s labor force (Gouveia and Saenz 2000). While working conditions and wage scales may vary from locality to locality, industry to industry, and even from plant to plant, there is little doubt that Latinos in Nebraska, particularly newcomers, are heavily represented in the bottommost jobs. Not unlike what research at the national level shows, many of these workers view self-employment as their best chance to achieve some semblance of the American dream. Newcomers have revitalized downtowns in communities where they are settling. However, institutional efforts to support this entrepreneurial drive appear to be rather minimal (Gouveia and Sanchez 2000; Lopez 2001).
- *Education and the Children of Immigrants.* Latino high-school students’ dropout rates far exceed the state’s average. From 1993 to 1999, an average of 7.9 Latino students enrolled in grades 7 to 12 quit each year, compared to an average of 2.8 in the overall student body. There are initial signs of a downward trend in Latino dropout rates. Latino enrollment in Nebraska universities continues to lag far behind the state’s average. We need to learn more about the factors that propel or impede these positive changes (theIndependent.com 2000).
- *Immigration and Social Policies.* In today’s political climate, policies often promote exclusion and isolation rather than inclusion and integration. Particularly problematic are the multiplication of barriers to legalization of newcomers and policies blocking access of undocumented

children to higher education (Gonzalez 2001; Parker 2000; INS Task Force 2000). Also counterproductive are policies denying newcomers access to minimum types of governmental assistance required to complement low wages and improve newcomers' opportunities for economic advancement. Among other issues, Latino newcomers lack sufficient access to unemployment and medical benefits, health, mental health and child care (Fix and Zimmermann 2000, Blankenau et al. 2000, Saint Francis Medical Center 2000).<sup>4</sup>

- *Newcomers' social capital.* There is evidence of abundant social capital and family solidarity within the new immigrant community. This ranges from informal credit mechanisms to establish businesses and purchase homes, to the provision of services such as child-care, translation, transportation, tax preparations, instilling strong cultural values in community children, healing the sick or burying the dead (Gouveia and Sanchez 2000). However, communities with large numbers of politically-vulnerable and below-poverty individuals often lack sufficient social capital to cancel out the negative effects of exclusionary immigration policies, segregation, racism, and institutional barriers to academic achievement (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).
- *Citizenship.* Nationally, The INS naturalized nearly 840,000 individuals in fiscal year 1999; this represents an increase of 81 percent over naturalization rates in 1998, which the INS attributes to improvements in application processes. In Nebraska, naturalization rates vary widely from year to year, with the highest rates reported during 1993, 1994, and 1995 when more than 11,500 individuals became naturalized. For 1999, the latest year for which data is available, 407 individuals became naturalized, most of them from the Philippines. Media reports and field research observations suggest Latinos' naturalization rates have climbed significantly during the last three years, as some of these immigrant streams reach maturity and services at the local INS office also improve. (Knapple Olson 2001). We will be tracking this information in future publications.
- *English Language Proficiency and Bilingualism.* As expected, new immigrant adults have a lower level of English language proficiency than their children. However, many adult immigrants acquire at least a functional knowledge of English after a few years of being in the United States (Gonzalez and Goodsell 2002). Census 2000 figures show that the share of individuals who speak English less than very well has increased from 1.5% to 4%. In communities such as Schuyler, where Latino population growth reached beyond 1,000%, nearly 20% of the population

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<sup>4</sup> For discussions and updates on policies hindering or facilitating the integration of newcomers to U.S. societies and regional states see, for example, [immigrantsrightsnetwork@yahoo.com](mailto:immigrantsrightsnetwork@yahoo.com), [student\\_adjustment@yahoo.com](mailto:student_adjustment@yahoo.com) and web sites for the National Immigration Forum, The National Council of La Raza, the Immigration Law Center and the International Migration News web bulleting maintained by the University of California-Davis.



speaks English less than very well. Tearing down barriers to English language acquisition, while fostering true bilingualism, are critical components of positive integration trajectories.

- *Housing Tenure and Neighborhood Segregation*. Census 2000 shows that 46% of Latinos in Nebraska own their own home, when compared to 67% of the total Nebraska population. Rates vary from community to community, with the highest rates found among historic Latino settlers in a county such as Scottsbluff (57%, or about 8% below the county's rate), and even Dawson (52%) to those where large numbers of newcomers can be found such as Douglas or Colfax counties where home ownership rates are much lower (42% and 44% respectively). Latinos are highly concentrated in low-income neighborhoods in cities such as Omaha (Ramirez-Salazar 2002). However, initial reviews of census data suggest that Latinos' residential patterns in the same city are beginning to resemble those of older European immigrants, slowly expanding from the southeastern to the southwestern part of Omaha.
- *Latino-Owned Businesses*. Mirroring national trends, Latin-owned businesses in Nebraska have increased dramatically in the last years. According to the 1997 Economic Census, the latest data available for minority-owned businesses, the number of Hispanic-owned businesses in the state was slightly below Black-owned businesses (1437 and 1565 respectively). Latino businesses also generated a higher number of "Sales and Receipts" and employed a larger number of workers than Black-owned businesses (US Census 1997).
- *Racism and Discrimination*. Reports of community tensions and cultural conflicts vary from community to community, though some common trends are also evident. Communities with no recent history of multi-cultural immigration, or where such history reveals patterns of past discrimination, are likely to be poorer contexts of reception than those deviating from these patterns (Gouveia and Sanchez 2002). For example, a recent survey conducted among newcomers by Saint Francis Hospital in Grand Island revealed that more than 60% of respondents felt racism was an obstacle to obtaining adequate health Care (St. Francis Medical Center 2001).

## **6. Summary: Socio-Demographic Changes and Integration**

Nebraska's Latino population growth outpaced that of neighboring states. Their presence in urban as well as non-metropolitan counties has contributed to a reversal in population decline evident in the 1990 census. A significant number of these Latino newcomers have settled in rural communities, largely as a result of meatpacking recruitment efforts. While the majority of Latinos still trace their roots to Mexico, an increasing number now come from Central and South America.

One of the most urgent questions various experts and community leaders are now asking is whether those communities benefiting from the arrival of Latino newcomers

will be able to retain this population in years to come (COMIT 2002). This is especially the case for rural communities where young people as a whole often find few opportunities for economic advancement (See, for example, the annual Nebraska Rural Poll conducted by the Center for Applied Rural Innovation, 2001). For Latinos and other minorities, the challenge may be even more serious and dependent not only on economic opportunities, but also on the local community's reception to cultural and ethnic/racial diversity. Despite their tendency to put down roots in their local community and stay close to home, Latino youth are not impervious to the same forces affecting non-Latino youths. Comparisons from the 1980 and 1990 censuses, for example, reveal that in the aftermath of the farm crisis of the early 1980s, young and educated Hispanics left small towns like Lexington at similar or even higher rates than non-Hispanics. Their permanence in these non-metropolitan counties in the future is not to be taken for granted. Their exodus could totally devastate rural communities that have recently prospered (Gouveia and Stull 1997).

The benefits of this demographic shift to urban areas are just as contingent. Here, the issue may not be so much whether the next generation of Latinos will stay, but whether the local socio-economic, educational, and cultural context in which they assimilate will foster a positive process of incorporation or downward mobility and integration into the lower tiers of society. Powerful research findings, as well as common sense, compel us to understand that whether or not this demographic shift becomes an asset is highly dependent on the capacity of our institutions and leaders to creatively harness the skills, cultural richness, and energy contained within these new communities of labor. Failure to do so will constitute an enormous loss of opportunity by the state and a predictably stormy future. The indicators outlined in this section provide initial warning, as well as hopeful signs with regard to newcomers' chances for successful integration.

This brief and necessarily incomplete review of Latino oldtimers and newcomers socio-economic conditions reveals a mixed picture with regard to Latinos' past successes in, and future chances for, overcoming negative contexts of reception and achieving successful integration. Latino oldtimers in Nebraska lag behind on a series of socio-economic measures when compared to the state's averages. However, they often do better than Latinos in other parts of the country. The challenge for us will be to achieve an even greater understanding of those unique characteristics of Nebraska's context of reception that both impede and facilitate successful integration. The challenge for policy makers and community leaders will be to enhance these reservoirs of oldtimer and newcomers' social and human capital. The state's future hinges largely on our capacity to construct a welcoming environment for newcomers and spaces for mutual understanding and communication among oldtimers and newcomers. Our survey and focus groups, which we analyze in the next two sections, disclose a growing recognition across all segments of Nebraska society and its institutions, that newcomers are indeed a major economic asset, as well as important contributors to the enrichment of cultural and family values that are held dear by older and newer residents of the state alike.

### **III. MAIL QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY**

#### **1. Methods**

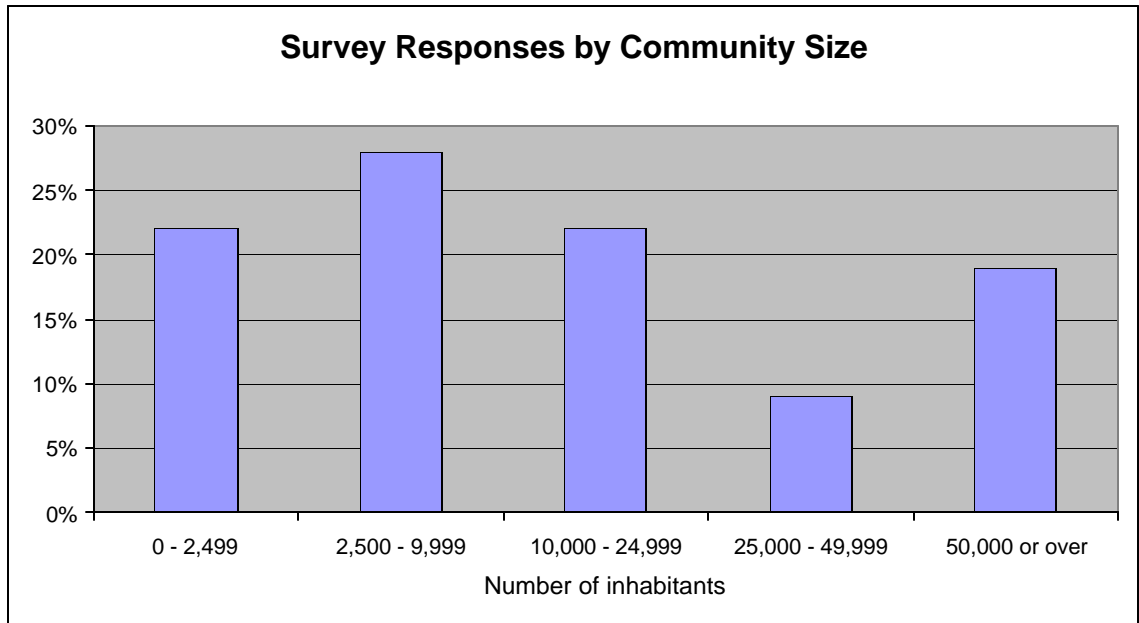
We selected communities where Hispanic/Latino settlements have existed for a long time, as well as those communities whose Latino population has been a more recent phenomena. First, we utilized 1990 and 2000 Census Bureau figures to discover those cities that had the largest absolute numbers of Hispanics/Latinos according to the 2000 figures, and, second, those cities who had experienced the largest growth percentage-wise between 1990 and 2000. In the case of some communities, their overall population might have been quite smaller, but proportionately their Hispanic/Latino population growth was greater than many of the larger cities. As a result, we came up with a list of 54 communities that met one or both of these criteria for inclusion.

We constructed a survey instrument that would not take a great amount of time to fill out so as to discourage agency/organization representatives to participate, but, at the same time, would provide us with enough useful information for a meaningful investigation of the integration of the immigrant workforce. The survey was sent to 1173 agencies/organizations in 54 communities and we had 81 returned for inadequate addresses or the organizations were no longer in existence. We sent follow-up reminder postcards as well as made follow-up telephone calls, and finally ending up receiving 237 responses. After adjusting for duplicates and agencies no longer in existence, the response rate was approximately 25 percent. This is within the margins of acceptable response rates for mailed questionnaires, although lower than we had hoped.

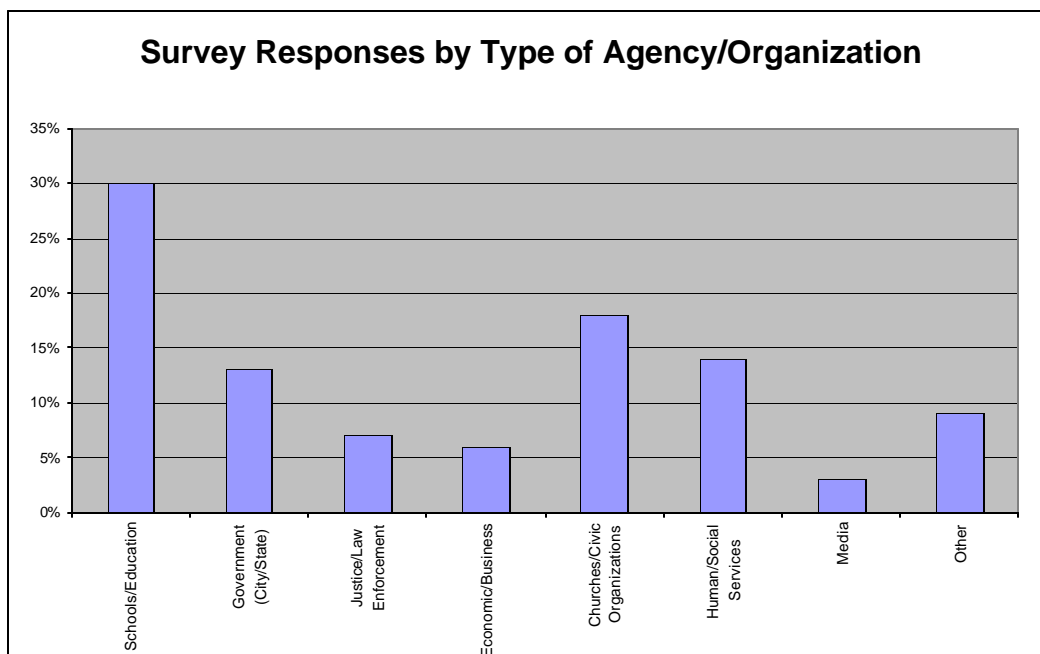
#### **2. Community size and types of agencies/organizations**

We wanted to ensure adequate representation from agencies in a wide variety of communities and therefore we established the following categories according to population size: less than 2,500, 2,500-9,999, 10,000-24,999, 25,000-49,999, and 50,000 or larger. Figure 1 (see below) shows the agencies/organizations that completed our survey according to the size of their community. Of the 237 responses, agencies in cities in the 2,500-9,999 range represented almost 28% of the total respondents, followed by 22% of the responses coming from cities 10,000-24,999. Overall, 72% of the responses came from agencies/organizations with populations of less than 25,000.

We grouped our agencies/organizations into the following eight categories: schools/education, city/state government, justice/law enforcement, economic/business, churches/civic organizations, human/social services, media and a residual “other” category. Figure 2 indicates the breakdown from those who responded. Clearly school/education agencies were the largest group of respondents, comprising 30% of the respondents, followed by churches/civic organizations (18%), human/social service agencies (14%) and city/state government (13%).



**FIGURE 1. Survey Responses by Community Size**



**FIGURE 2. Survey Responses by Agency/Organization Type**

### 3. Latino-serving agencies and employers of Latinos

As part of our study we were interested in looking at what agencies/organizations were primary *service providers* for Latinos and what proportion of these same agencies were *employers* of Latinos in their workplace. Of the 237 respondents, 110 of the agencies (approximately 46%) served Latinos in some capacity. Also, 73% (174) of the total number of agencies employed Latinos either as full-time or part-time employees. When looking at the issue of whether or not those who provide services for Latinos also employed them, we constructed the following table:

**TABLE 5. Percentage of Latino Employees By Latino-Serving Agencies**

	Percentage of Latino Employees					
<b>Latinos Served Monthly</b>	> 10%	11-25%	26-50%	51-75%	< 75%	<b>Total</b>
1-10	23	1				24
11 – 25	14	1	1			16
26 – 50	9	1			1	11
51 – 100	9			1		10
More than 100	28	11	4		6	49
<b>Total</b>	83	14	5	1	7	110

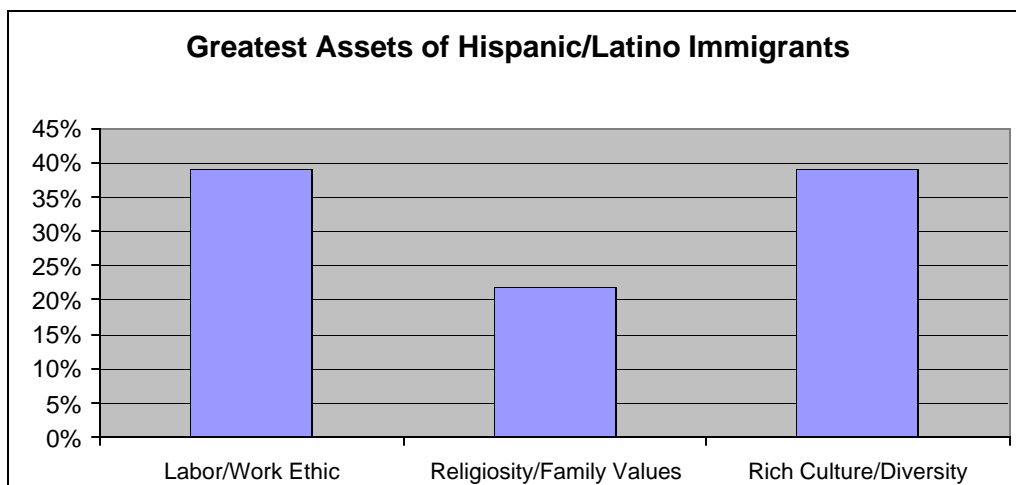
The results indicate that 75% of these service providers have workforces of which Latinos comprise less than 10% of their employees. Only 8 of these agencies (7%) indicated that Latinos make up more than 50% of their workforce populations. Unfortunately we did not have available the total number of people served by these service providers so as to be able to calculate the percentage of Latinos served and compare it with the percentage of Latinos employed. Nevertheless, it is important to continue to assess the connection between service providers and employers. If real integration is to take place then employment of Latinos should increase particularly in those businesses that provide services to the Latino population.

### 4. Hispanic/Latino Immigrants as Community Assets

We felt it was important to see whether or not agencies/organizations view Hispanic/Latino immigrants as contributors or potential contributors to their respective communities. In order to address this issue we asked the following question - “What are the three greatest assets Hispanic/Latino immigrants bring to your community?” When

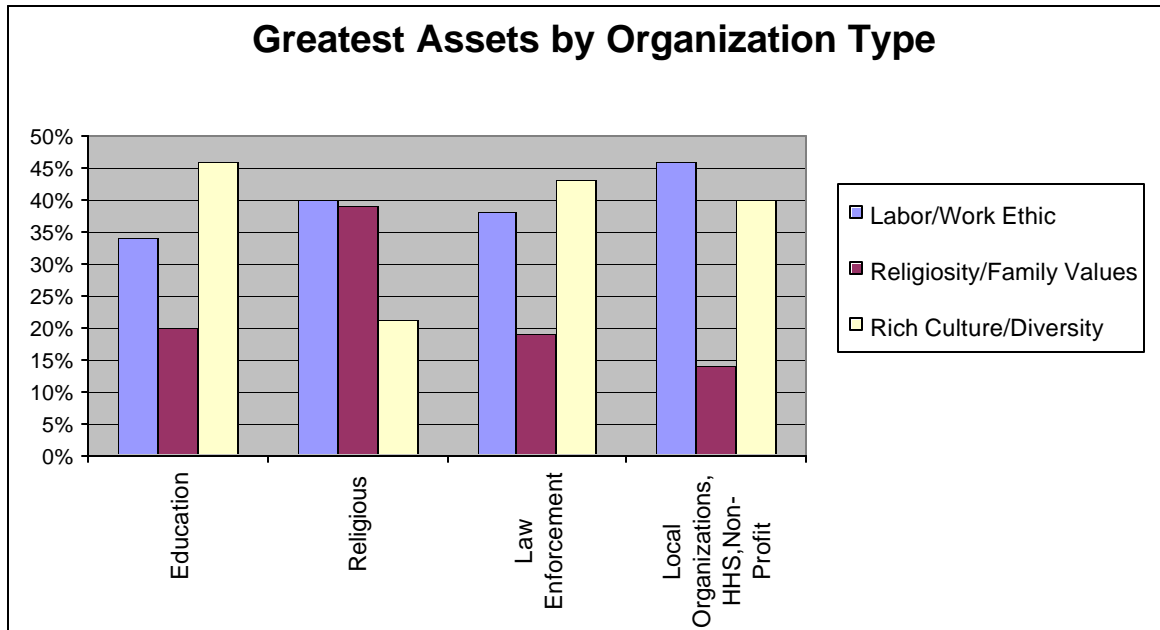
looking at the greatest strengths Latino immigrants bring to their communities, we found the following trends as reflected below in Figure 3:

- Responses related to labor/work ethic contributions, cultural enrichment of the community, and the strength of family and religious values were the most frequently mentioned assets
- Labor/work ethic contributions and cultural diversity/enrichment were consistently the top two answers, thereby highlighting the real and potential economic contributions these immigrants make, while at the same time recognizing the cultural richness the newcomers bring to the community
- Another dimension of culture was also a part of the third most frequently mentioned set of assets – strong religious and family values



**Figure 3. Greatest Assets of Hispanic/Latino Immigrants**

When analyzed by organizational type differences were found between types of agencies (see Figure 4). For example, forty six percent of the school/education organizations answering this question mentioned as the major asset, factors, which we grouped under a category called **“Rich Culture/Diversity.”** Thirty four percent referred to **“Labor/Work Ethic”** as the second most important asset. Twenty percent (20%) mentioned as an additional asset, those related to **“Religiosity/Family Values.”** Law enforcement agencies also exhibited a similar ranking order. However, local organizations, including health and human services and non-profit organizations, demonstrated a slightly different ranking pattern with labor/work ethic listed first followed by rich culture/diversity and then religiosity/family values. We found that religious organizations ranked religiosity/family values and labor/work ethic equally followed by rich culture/diversity.



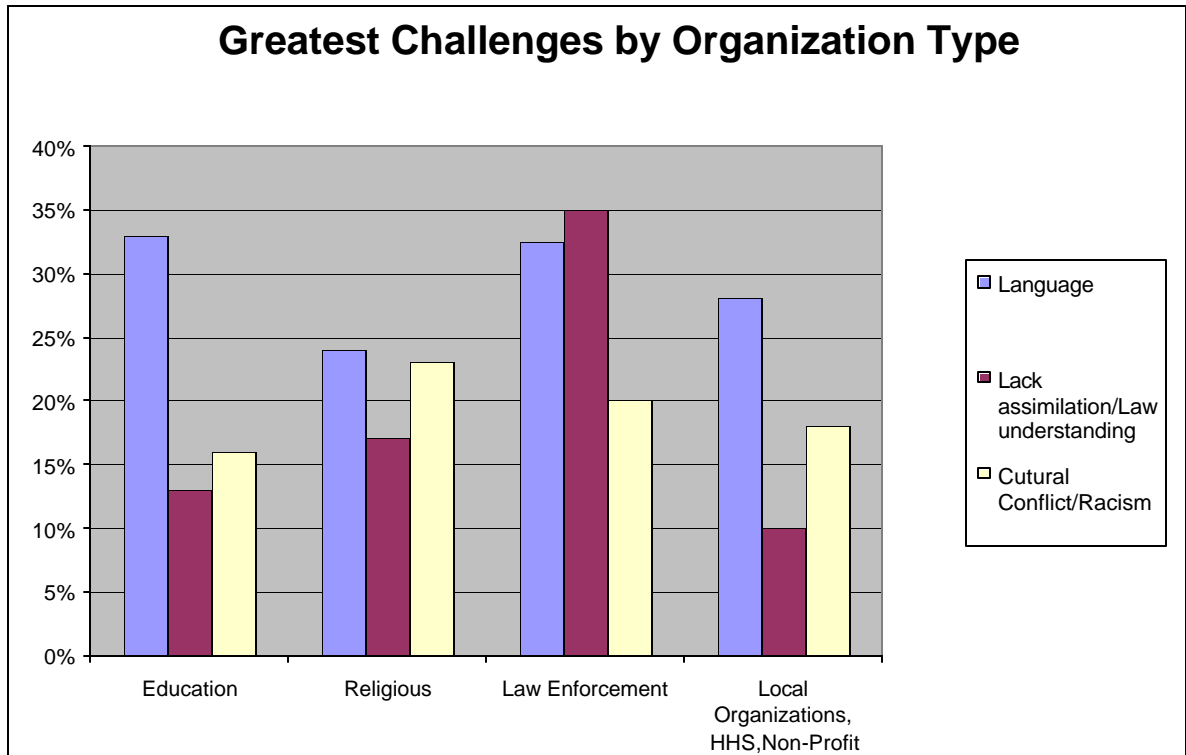
**FIGURE 4. Greatest Assets by Organization Type**

Respondents often elaborated on what they meant by these various answers. For example, the contributions of newcomers to the workforce were not perceived by respondents as being simply a numerical contribution. Instead, they stressed newcomers' **strong work ethic** and used adjectives such as "industrious," and "reliable." Moreover, these workers' economic contribution was not viewed as one that was confined to providing a much needed workforce, but also as consumers and energetic entrepreneurs and professionals who revitalized downtowns and brought new enthusiasm to their organizations.

## 5. Challenges and barriers to integration

As part of our interview we asked, "What are the three greatest challenges Hispanic/Latino immigrants pose to your community?" This particular question assesses more directly the issue of barriers to integration. The responses revealed the following trends:

- Across all agencies, the most commonly mentioned barriers to integration had to do with **language, cultural conflicts/racism, and lack of assimilation and understanding the law** (See Figure 5). There are, however, differences between these various groups of organizations which are discussed below in more detail in Table 6.



**FIGURE 5. Greatest Challenges by Organization Type**

As would be expected, when categorized according to organizational types (see Table 6), there were some important differences which seem to derive from differences in the types of problems, barriers, issues with which each of these organizations is most likely to encounter in their daily work. The ability to view a combination of answers across all organizational types allows us to capture the multi-dimensional and often mutually reinforcing nature of these barriers. Language was by far the most common response across educational organizations (33%), religious organizations (24%) and local organizations, HHS and non-profit agencies (28%). Each of these organizations also ranked cultural conflicts/racism as the second major challenge to integrating Latino immigrants into the community. In the case of law enforcement agencies, they saw lack of assimilation/understanding of the law as the greatest barrier, followed closely by language issues and then cultural conflicts/racism as a distant third. However, while lack of assimilation and knowledge of laws and community norms were the next most important response for law enforcement agencies (35%), only 17% of religious organizations and only 13% and 10% of education and local government and non-profit organizations respectively thought this was a serious barrier to integration. Finally, in varying degrees of importance, all of the organizations also highlighted poor jobs/low wages, the need for education and training, basic needs for housing, health and transportation, and lack of access to legal status and advice, as potential barriers for the integration of Latino immigrants.



**TABLE 6. Greatest Challenges by Organization Type**

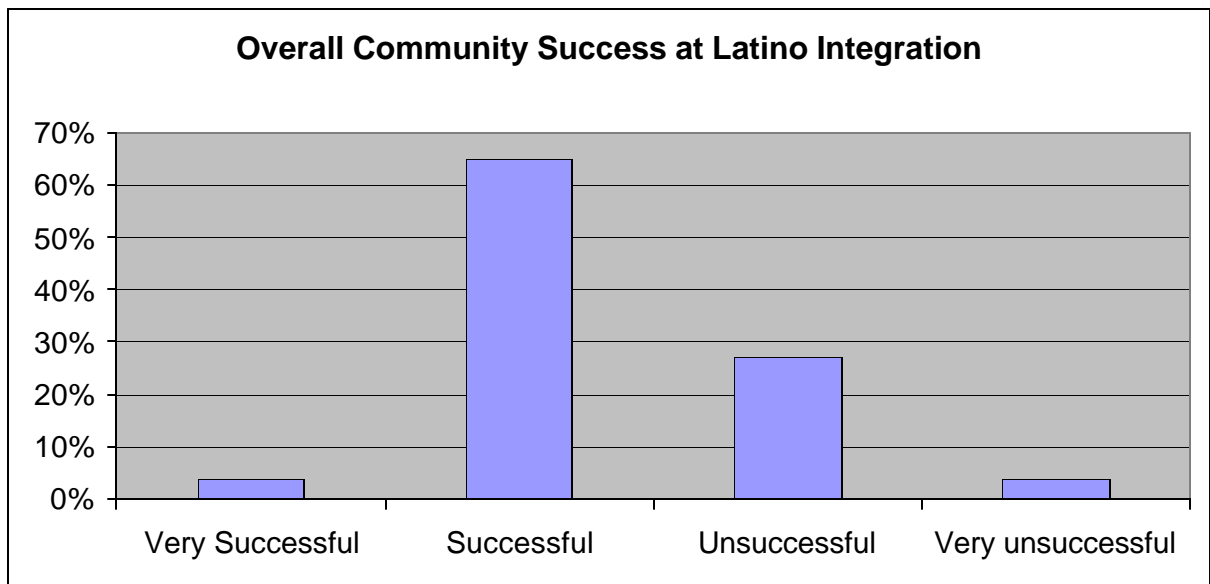
<b>Organization Challenges</b>	Education	Religious	Law Enforcement	Local Organizations, HHS, Non-Profit
Language	33%	24%	32.5%	28%
Lack assimilation/Law understanding	13%	17%	35%	10%
Cultural Conflict/Racism	16%	23%	20%	18%
Poor jobs/Low wages	12%	9%	2.5%	9%
Education/Training needs	13%	8%	2.5%	11%
Basic Needs	11%	11%	5%	14%
Lack of access to legal status and advice	2%	8%	2.5%	10%

Here a word about **language barriers** is in order. Language is a much more complex variable than it appears on the surface, though not in surprising ways. Language provides an important ‘entry point’ for communication with and integration of Latino newcomers. When analyzing the various ways in which respondents mentioned this barrier, a split of sorts becomes obvious between those who place the burden of responsibility for this barrier squarely on the shoulders of Latinos who “refuse to learn English,” and those who view it as a two-way communication issue where the burden is shared by the newcomers themselves *and* community members *and* agencies/organizations alike. Those who viewed language as a two-way process tended to stress barriers such as excessive work hours or lack of transportation and easy access to ESL classes as the true barriers to English language proficiency. Additionally, respondents in social agencies as well as private organizations stressed the serious lack of bilingual and bicultural staff and leaders as very serious barriers to integration. Bilingualism was valued by many as a much needed skill, not a luxury, to be possessed by all and, as one respondent noted, “We should all learn Spanish.”

## **6. Community Success at Integration of Latino Immigrants**

In a separate question we asked respondents to “...circle the response that overall best reflects, in their opinion, *the success your community has had in integrating Hispanic/Latino immigrants into your community*: “Very successful,” “Successful,” “Unsuccessful,” or “Very Unsuccessful.”

Although 26% feel their community has been unsuccessful in their integration efforts, an overwhelming 65% of the respondents feel their communities have been “successful” in integrating Latino immigrants. Very few respondents felt that their efforts had been either very successful (3%) or very unsuccessful (3%). The combination of very successful and successful (68%) establishes a strong base of support for future integration efforts.



**FIGURE 6. Community Success at Latino Integration**

When looking at this answer by type of organization (see Table 7), sixty-four percent (64%) of the education/school organization respondents that answered this question, for example, agreed that their community had been successful and, in a few of those cases (3%), very successful in facilitating the integration of newcomers. Local organizations, health and human service agencies, and non-profits also reflected a similar pattern of responses, although indicating slightly higher percentage for the unsuccessful category. While religious organizations had the highest percentage for unsuccessful (33%), they also had the strongest indication for very successful at 17%. In the case of law enforcement, the responses were either strongly in support of successful (73%) or unsuccessful (27%). Law enforcement agencies did not feel that community efforts at integration had been either very successful or very unsuccessful.

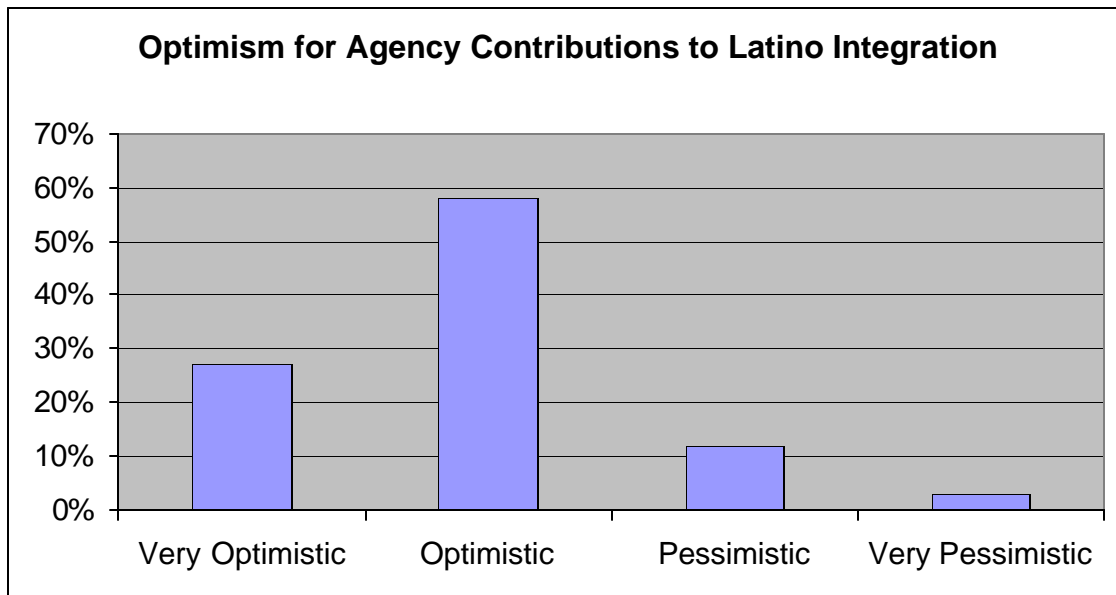
**TABLE 7. Community Success at Integration by Organization Type**

<b>Organization Success</b>	Education*	Religious	Law Enforcement	Local Organizations, HHS, Non-Profit
Very Successful	3%	17%		3%
Successful	64%	44%	73%	64%
Unsuccessful	19%	33%	27%	32%
Very unsuccessful	3%	6%		1%

\* Education does not equal 100% because several respondents indicated answers that were between two of the four categories listed.

### **7. Optimism for Agency Contributions to Latino Integration**

We wanted to see how respondents felt about the future role their own agencies will play in the integration of Latino newcomers. As a result, we asked respondents: “Overall, are you optimistic or pessimistic about your agency’s contribution to the positive integration of Hispanic/Latino immigrants in your community?”



**FIGURE 7. Optimism for Agency Contributions to Latino Integration**

As shown in Figure 7, when respondents were taking into consideration their own agency’s role in the integration of this workforce they demonstrated a strong inclination for being either optimistic (59%) or very optimistic (27%). Only fourteen percent of the respondents were pessimistic (11%) or very pessimistic (3%) about the role their agency

will provide in integration efforts. Ninety-one percent of the schools that answered this question said they were “optimistic” or “very optimistic.”

## 8. Optimism and City Size

This overall strong feeling of being optimistic and/or very optimistic was also evident when looking at city size and overall optimism. Table 8 illustrates the distribution of overall optimism by city size:

**TABLE 8. Overall Optimism By City Size**

	<b>Overall Optimism</b>				
<b>City Size</b>	Very Pessimistic	Pessimistic	Optimistic	Very Optimistic	<b>Total</b>
0 – 999		1	4	1	6
1,000 - 2,499	2	7	11	7	27
2,500 - 9,999	3	7	29	6	45
10,000 – 24,999		3	28	15	46
25,000 – 49,999		2	9	8	19
50,000 – 99,999			1		1
100,000 or more	1	1	24	11	37
<b>Total</b>	6	21	106	48	181

It is clear that for many communities, especially those ranging from 1,000-10,000 in size, a cautious optimism remains. These agencies recognize the kinds of changes taking place in their communities and are optimistic, but also recognize the resistance from some community members to achieve the constructive outcomes that can result from the positive integration of the immigrant workforce population.

A small rural county agency representative expressed this gained wisdom as her reason for being optimistic in this way: “I have been in this community for 15 years; looking back where we started I’ve seen tremendous gains; they just didn’t happen overnight. There is still a lot of work to be done.”

## 9. Summary: Mail Questionnaires

A preliminary conclusion can be drawn from an analysis of the mail questionnaire responses. To some extent, organizations closer to the plight of newcomers as workers and families trying to improve their lives, are more likely to focus on institutional and social-context barriers to integration, while agencies such as local, state and federal law enforcement groups are somewhat more likely to locate the barriers to integration within the immigrant community itself. Lack of information provided in culturally-appropriate and accessible formats, less than welcoming attitudes by some of their social agency co-workers, and problematic immigration laws, are the types of answers that resonated among the former rather than the latter organizational types.

However, this was not a perfect relationship. It is interesting to note, for example, that intolerant, racist, and prejudicial attitudes found among older residents were a source of concern across organizational types, including law enforcement agencies. As one law enforcement respondent put it, “the racist actions of others” in the community precludes a smooth incorporation of newcomers. Answers given by some religious organizations were equally revealing. While at times adopting a paternalistic tone toward newcomers and focusing primarily on what they viewed as cultural deficiencies of this population (e.g., their “disregard for the laws and community norms”), a significant number of respondents also spoke of their frustration with their older congregations’ lack of acceptance, and respect for, the Hispanic/Latino population. As one respondent put it, “Many/most of the members with power in the church don’t want “them” in our congregation.”

Moreover, as we try to make sense of the combined answers about assets and challenges some seemingly paradoxical trends are revealed and require further analysis. As suggested earlier, an overwhelming number of respondents presented a very positive picture of the Latino workers and families and of their contributions to their communities. “These are good people” was a typical characterization. Yet, the question on challenges at times seemed to emphasize a contradictory set of less positive traits found among this same Latino or newcomer population. We believe, based not only on survey by focus group responses discussed later, that there is a logical way to reconcile these seemingly schizophrenic views about newcomers. Respondents seem to be making a distinction between what they see are two very different segments of the newcomer population - not unlike the kinds of distinctions many of us make about the population as a whole. The first and largest segment by far, is being conceived as the ‘core’ of the newcomer population, characterized by its strong work ethic and family values. The second, and much smaller segment, is characterized as those in the periphery of this larger segment and is composed by the minority who violate norms, participate in some criminal activity, or exhibit behavioral problems at school. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, many respondents argue that this “segmented process” of integration is at least partly driven by the institutional barriers to communication, learning, access to legal documents, poverty and isolation. It is in the focus group discussions where these more nuanced community analyses of the barriers to integration and their multiple and confounding impacts become clearer.

## IV. FOCUS GROUPS

### 1. Methods

We conducted a total of six focus groups in three different metropolitan and non-metropolitan communities. The selection was guided by our advanced knowledge of these communities and issues we wished to explore in each of them. The groups were composed of either Latino newcomers to the state, agency representatives or a combination of both. A list of open-ended questions was distributed to participants at the start of the meeting. The questions required that participants think about the major economic, social and political issues confronting the Latino newcomer and immigrant population and the community.

### 2. Results

The following is a brief overview of some of the major barriers to integration highlighted during focus group sessions. We illustrate these themes with selective testimonies offered by various participants.

#### 2.1 Poverty, Working Conditions, and Safety Nets

The mutually reinforcing barriers of poor work conditions, poverty, precarious employment and legal status were underscored in all of our focus groups. The quote below is representative of their comments:

*This [the immigrant community] is a very unstable community. The main reason is their economic situation. Maybe their jobs are new and they cannot pay the deposit, or the husband lost his job. They don't have a safety net that can help them get back in their feet. Or they are stuck in a low-wage job because they are not able to adjust their legal status or don't speak English. The families are young and are having children, the husband gets injured in a job and they have no health insurance, usually because they don't think they can afford it or even be eligible for it... They often don't qualify for benefits from the county or state help or this is simply not sufficient... All these health issues we see everyday are related to poverty...I think they just need an opportunity to start, get a job, have some money, and they will prosper from there.*

Participants often connected these concerns directly with the negative impact these socio-economic conditions will have on their children, the second generation. An issue that received significant attention was the link between these conditions and the loss of parental supervision and involvement in their children's life, as well as the erosion of parental authority. This situation can in turn lead to "dissonant" or negative modes of incorporation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001):

*All this vacuum is caused by their parents needing to work, because salaries are low, parents cannot sit together with their children, they do not have time, they are working two jobs, sometimes they are ill...their parents cannot be there for them .*

Latino newcomers reiterated old complaints about working conditions, line speeds, and treatment by supervisors in meatpacking plants and other places of employment, such as local restaurants. During a focus group conducted with thirty Latino workers, the view that the Governor's Meatpacking Workers' Bill of Rights (State of Nebraska 2000) is routinely ignored by employers was widely held:

*What happens is that what it says out there [on the Bill posted outside the working area] is not followed inside. They don't even let us go to the bathroom, one asks for permission to go and they don't let us, and it is difficult because sometimes comes a point when you almost want to go right there, standing up.*

In a prominent meatpacking town, a group of Latino and non-Latino professionals agreed that, while these jobs can be a good start for many newcomers, some of the problematic practices connected with this industry die hard, especially when it comes to the way management tends to deal with injuries and other worker grievances:

*I could say that at this table there is no one who does not know someone personally who has been injured [at the meatpacking plant] and who has not gotten a fair treatment..*

## **2.2 Education and Training**

Focus group participants across the state overwhelmingly agreed that one of the most critical needs the state and federal governments must address is that of facilitating college entry and adjustment of legal status for a large number of students who are undocumented and yet comprise a critical component of Nebraska's dwindling and future labor force.

A teacher illustrated this issue well:

*One of my students right now, he's going to graduate this coming May. Since Kindergarten he has had straight A's, He's too much brain for the school he's in and the teachers recognize that; he wants to go to school, [college] but he's not legal.*

One mother expressed her dilemma this way:

*My children are eight and six years old. The oldest has no papers and the youngest was born in the U.S. We are very thankful about the fact that our children have access to free public education until the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. But at the same time that one pushes our kids to get an education and aspire to a professional career, we know that at the end of the road everything stops because they have no*

*papers and no social security. We work from sun up to sun down hoping that our children will have a better life. But we have no way to get legal papers so they can do so. Today I got the reports from my eight year old. He got the honors band and he was so excited about having earned the honor to have lunch with the Principal. It breaks my heart when I think that some day soon I will have to tell him, no more education. We contribute a lot to the economy of this state. This is not fair.*

An INS representative in the focus group shared the following legal opinion:

*The Supreme Court has ruled that any child can go to school and then, in terms of college, a lot of times you hear colleges saying they don't want to take the responsibility, well, that's baloney, if they want to give the kid a full ride then they can give him a full ride.*

Community agency representatives also expressed concerns about adult newcomers' limited access to language classes, vocational training and opportunities to pursue or complete their higher education. They spoke at length about the absence of mechanisms to accept or validate professional degrees earned in native countries in areas such as teaching, medical fields, and business.

A school administrator provided one among numerous examples:

*We need teachers to be role models. We need to grow our own bilingual staff members, we know two or three women who have quite a bit of education, who could be wonderful teachers...we need to support them...these people are not in the position to drop everything and go to school; we have to find some flexible way to bring the programs to them and to be able to utilize the education they bring with them.*

A worker expresses the same issue from the vantage point of a newcomer:

*I was a teacher in Mexico, but here I am nothing.*

Finally, every focus group yielded concerns about the economic and social barriers inhibiting parents' involvement in their children's schools and educational progress:

*[Women think] I have to work, I have to clean the house, I have to take care of my kids..." they do all that and they don't feel they have time to go to their child's school; and, again, it is always the mothers the ones that have to go to school and get involved and she is the one also that takes care of the family.*

A local pastor pondered about the long-term impacts of these barriers to parental involvement:



*The most affected are the children, you know, they reflect the family problems. Some of them have very low levels of self-esteem. Parents don't have time because they are working two, sometimes three, jobs a day...*

## **2.3 Leadership and Community Involvement**

The theme of the need for Latino role models was commonly expressed as a call, by Latino and non-Latino participants alike, for a more equitable inclusion of newcomer and oldtimer Latino residents in positions of leadership as well as in leadership training programs. Work schedules, language, lack of transportation, limited efforts or creativity on the part of local institutions or policies were some of the perceived barriers that community participants identified.

## **2.4 Language Barriers**

Language barriers, figured prominently among all of our focus group responses. Participants expressed their view of language barriers not solely as the absence of English language skills among newcomers but, more generally, as a communication problem. This problem, most of them believed, was also exacerbated by a serious shortage of bilingual translators, reluctance among some oldtimers to even consider gaining some functional knowledge of a second language, or make any real effort to communicate with newcomers.

The sound of a foreign language seems to elicit irrational fears among some community members. A U.S.-born Latina was told by a neighbor, while shopping in a supermarket where Spanish-speaking shoppers could be overheard:

*I hate Hispanics. 'So you hate me?' [asked the Latina neighbor] Oh no, you are different, you speak English.*

Lack of transportation and child care, as well as excessive work hours and double shifts, were mentioned as barriers to community integration in their own right as well as to newcomers' participation in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Women appear particularly disadvantaged by these structural barriers. In addition, ESL teachers often reported that husbands are sometimes reluctant to let their wives attend classes because they feel that they interfere with their home and child care responsibilities.

A former ESL teacher expressed widely known problems among Latino community members and agency representatives:

*One of the things I saw were the barriers for people that came to the room, even though it [class] was free, is that classes were at times when people were working, and the other problem was for a lot of the women, it was mostly women who took these classes, their husbands did not approve of them leaving the house. And, second of all, it was a child care issue; because we didn't provide child care and they were not allowed to bring their children*

On the other hand, local community representatives report that ESL classes are constantly full and there are waiting lists in some cases. However, ESL teachers also told us newcomers tend to get discouraged after realizing these classes are not accelerated language programs: “They just stop coming; time is extremely costly and valuable to them,” said one teacher. Community representatives concur in their views that, more often than not, ESL classes lack standardization, consistent curriculum, qualified staff, and are not equipped to provide students with English language skills beyond relatively elementary levels.<sup>5</sup> Latino workers in the focus groups expressed their frustration in this manner:

*Let's accept the fact that there may be people who don't want to learn English; but there are many more who do because they want to improve their lives; because after all that's why we came, to improve our lives....English is not an easy language; experts say it takes about ten years to learn English. Precisely because we don't speak English we have to take the hardest jobs, then many times it becomes physically impossible to study after such hard work all day; that is one of the most difficult things.*

A proposed solution, echoed by Latino and non-Latino focus group participants, was that employers who recruit and rely heavily on large number of immigrant workers, be encouraged or required to offer English classes during working hours as an expected component of employee training.

## **2. 5 Health**

Lack of health, particularly mental health, services was a major concern of social service agency participants. The problem is particularly serious in non-metropolitan or smaller communities. Participants explained this as a consequence of the same combination of mutually reinforcing barriers alluded to previously, and a problem that ranged from sheer absence of services to a lack of bilingual and culturally-sensitive staff.

## **2.6 Housing**

The lack of adequate housing was particularly salient in the metropolitan area focus groups, though it is a theme that emerged in non-metropolitan community focus groups as well.

A church Pastor expressed what is now common knowledge in his metropolitan community:

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<sup>5</sup> The seriousness of this problem is underscored by the recent organization of an ad hoc coalition of representatives from various Omaha agencies and individuals concerned with this issue. They have recently mailed a questionnaire to governmental and non-governmental agencies teaching ESL as a first step to find more adequate solutions.

*There is too much exploitation. There are not lots of housing facilities. Others live in very bad conditions. Some have difficulty maintaining the apartment in good condition and the landlords do not help them. If the heating breaks down, well their solution is that they should buy a small, personal, [space] heater. So they are paying for these expensive apartments that are in very bad conditions.*

## **2.7 Assimilation and Successful Integration**

Very few focus group participants wondered out loud about the “assimilation-ability” of newcomers. In fact, most seemed to take for granted that these workers and their families came to try to make a better life and the rest would come in time. However, their comments suggested the same concerns, captured in literature about assimilation, about the dangers of segmented assimilation and the fact that fast-paced assimilation and the simultaneous loss of their historical culture does not necessarily equal successful integration.

A social agency director’s quote best captured this concern:

*I think that we will have two layers, one are the kids that become successful, that get their high school and college degrees and become medium-size business owners. And the other will be those kids who get into the system [become assimilated] but are not able to make it because of social and economic situations.*

A second agency director continues this thought process thus:

*However, those who get into the system are losing their cultural connection, their cultural values. Their parents want them to become Americanized, to speak English without an accent...so these kids become ‘American’ but that does not necessarily make them successful. They end up assimilating into all these material values and want new and expensive shoes and other things their parents cannot afford. They become frustrated and have no system in place or their own cultural values they have now rejected to protect them.*

The loss of cultural values and their native language was mentioned, as it is in the research literature, as leading to the loss of parental authority and family cohesion which can in turn direct children toward the destructive route of segmented or dissonant assimilation. It is this process that scholars refer to as “downward” as opposed to “upward” assimilation.

## **2.8 Racism and Cultural Separateness**

Problems of community prejudice and cultural tensions were mentioned in each of our focus groups. In some cases, they ranked at the top of participants’ barriers to integration, while in others racism was second to other issues such as language or education. Often, it was mentioned by social agency representatives who wished to

highlight the problem of poorly trained, culturally insensitive, and biased staff in health and human service agencies:

*“There are some very good people out there, but there are more of the [ones that practice] discrimination and have nasty attitudes.”*

A Latino newcomer expressed it this way:

*For example, if one goes to request some kind of service from a person, then they treat people with a bad attitude or they judge us people... sometimes I imagine that they look at Latinos as if we are worse than animals, that we don't think, that we have no intelligence; they have no idea if we received an education in our country; they don't really know who we are, but they immediately catalogue us.*

## **2.9 Immigration and Social Policies**

. Particular laws and policies were considered especially problematic in the effort to integrate newcomer communities. Among them were those denying undocumented children a college education, and legal or mixed-status immigrant families access to insurance, public benefits and Nebraska driver's licenses.

The following quote captured the spirit of these exchanges:

*Sometimes they require a bank account number [to secure housing, for example] and you can't open a bank account if you don't have a social security number. What I feel is that they are here, they have been here, for generations; they will be here after you and me are gone. And the United States is losing a lot economically because if they pay for their drivers' license, it is better security for all of us, for all of society to identify them. When there is an accident, we need where to go to make that person responsible. But as long as we deny all these things to them and society gets angry....I guess where I am coming from is [from the point of view of] a teacher. If I want them to come here and live in my town, I need to help them and guide them because I want a nice town to live in.*

The INS representative disagreed:

*This is a nation of immigrants but it is also a nation of laws...We would be opening the doors... not too many people have the standard of living of the United States. I think that the bigger picture is to help Mexico with their infrastructure as opposed to, um, anything else.*

To what another participant responded:

*But when in the world are we going to help Mexico and see that happen? The United States might have a better standard of living, but we*

*still want these people over here anyway...so the best thing is to try to do the right thing. Don't try to tell me about crime, my only crime [speaking figuratively] is that my kids are hungry. That's a crime?*

### **3. Summary: Focus Groups**

Many of the same topics and themes found in our survey questionnaires also emerged in our focus groups. However, the open-ended nature of the focus group discussions often yielded richer responses and allowed for a more in-depth exploration of these themes. In general, focus group participants concentrated on barriers to integration associated with poor jobs and lack of access to key community institutions and benefits. These discussions provided us with findings easily supported in the literature, as well as more subjective impressions that confirmed the presence of a complex picture when it comes to Latino newcomer integration. These immigrant communities work extremely hard but face uphill battles in their road to successful socio-economic adaptation. Some of those challenges are due to deficient education, absence of legal status, and the mere fact of having migrated –regardless of education– via labor as opposed to more socio-economically privileged networks.

Communities in Nebraska, and the many agencies and organizations they house, have also worked hard–albeit some more than others–to integrate Latinos into their midst. Participants spoke about how, early on, their communities were in denial, thinking Latinos and their jobs would soon leave. Today, they are beginning to recognize how critical the contributions of these newcomers are for the future of their communities. Many listed a growing number of programs and “good practices” their communities can now showcase as creative actions to facilitate Latino newcomer integration. These initiatives range from Headstart and new Early Start programs, to inter-agency committees, bilingual classes for newcomers and oldtimers alike, youth leadership and information technology programs for kids, and even constructive relationships with local INS offices.

Prejudice and cultural separateness are still prominent, yet we also encountered a significant number of people who have done everything possible to create a welcoming context of reception. Latino newcomers have also worked very hard to get involved in their new home. Focus group discussions richly captured the same optimism revealed by our surveys, even if most participants admitted that they are not yet ‘very’ successful in their Latino integration efforts.

## **V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Summary**

Our research findings support previously documented assumptions that view integration as a two-way process whereby its trajectory and outcomes are largely shaped by the extent to which immigrants and newcomers experience a welcoming or hostile

environment and accompanying attitudes. Historically, immigrant groups have availed themselves to a number of resources and institutional support from the larger community—albeit these experiences have varied widely from group to group (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). They have also tapped into their abundant energy and unsurpassed motivation to better themselves, their children, and the community in which they hope to live for a long time.

The combination of data sources utilized in this report reveals a daunting number of mutually reinforcing barriers and challenges to integration. It is important to note, however, that while many of these barriers are unique to newcomers, many apply equally to all low-income and politically vulnerable populations in the state. We also identify critical reservoirs of human potential and social capital, as well as good practices and innovative policies, which can be mobilized to tear down barriers to successful socio-economic adaptation. In fact, we have reason to think that Nebraska may very well turn out to be a much more welcoming destination, and produce more positive measures of incorporation than states where elected officials have adopted more punitive and short-sighted nativist attitudes toward newcomers. However, all of this is contingent on how proactive we, as a state, become in steering these socio-demographic transformations toward constructive actions and policies. Already, numerous communities, schools, human and social service agencies, advocacy organizations, policy-makers and churches put into action a growing number of good practices, the evaluation of which we could learn a great deal.

These ‘best’ practices include:

- School programs promoting true bilingualism among all Nebraska children, regardless of national origin.
- The passage of the Meatpacking Workers Bill of Rights
- Significant improvements in Nebraska’s Primary Care for the newborn
- Efforts by state and federal legislators to introduce bills addressing educational barriers to undocumented children
- The establishment of a Mexican Consulate in Omaha
- Multicultural celebrations that strive to include oldtimers and newcomers
- Use of Latino and non-Latino media to educate and inform the community about issues that promote integration
- Parents Training Parents programs devoted to involve Latino parents in the school and educational lives of their children
- Chambers of Commerce diversity committees to support emerging Latino businesses and consumers
- Bilingual programs for children such as Headstart, Latino Book Club and “My World.”
- Computer and language classes for Latino and Latina adults.
- Growth of Unions and other forms of worker organizations
- Proliferation of advocacy organizations tracking and defending newcomers’ civil and human rights.

- Proliferation of Latino community social and health services agencies
- Establishment of legal clinics to service the newcomer population

Research summarized at the beginning of this report alluded to the dangers of adopting a *laissez faire* attitude toward the barriers that stand in the way of a successful integration of newcomers. Particularly costly to the state's future is the high risk of 'downward' assimilation facing the children of newcomers, most of who are U.S. citizens. Research shows that most newcomers arrive as adults, their education and other expensive facets of their earlier years are paid by their native countries. Savings to the U.S. are estimated to be at least \$69,000 per immigrant. Conversely, our failure to educate undocumented children can amount to income losses in the thousands of dollars, not only for the immigrant child and his or her family, but also for universities, potential employers, and state coffers.

The voices captured in our research generally reflected an understanding of the link between strong ties to one's own cultural and linguistic roots and the secure footing from which journeys toward successful adaptation can be launched. The very core of U.S. identity and supporting lore are reaffirmed periodically by immigrant stories of successful integration. Whether we realize it or not, U.S. identity is not something fixed or its definition owned by a particular cultural, linguistic, or racial group. Instead it is continuously being re-constructed, re-negotiated and re-validated through, not despite of, our endless exchanges with the multiple groups that make up our diverse society. Today this re-examination of identity is again at one of its more salient moments, but it should not be cause for concern. The true essence of "American" identity is ultimately anchored on such universal values as freedom, democracy, justice and equality, rather than on a presumption of monolithic language and cultural traditions. Thus, American identity has and will continue to withstand the test of time - but only for as long as such core values continue to be reaffirmed through our actions and policies.

## **2. Policy Recommendations**

1. Immigration policy. Erase barriers to undocumented children's education, immigrant family cohesiveness and reunification (e.g. support 245i legislation), acquisition of drivers' license, immigrants' access to benefits and work support services given to other low-income families, as well as access to legal status and the full range of labor rights and benefits afforded to all Nebraska workers.
2. Eliminate economic barriers via support for living wages, workers' organizing efforts, inclusion of English language acquisition as an allowable work activity, and effective monitoring of the Meatpacking Workers Bill of Rights.
3. Allocate additional resources for communities and agencies shouldering the task of facilitating the integration of newcomers.
4. Encourage employers, local communities and educational institutions to create training and education programs to truly capitalize on the assets brought by

newcomers and fulfill our mission to create a productive and economically healthy labor force.

5. Invest in children's educational opportunities, including the encouragement of cultural identity and bilingualism to prevent a process of segmented assimilation.
6. Support parents in their efforts to preserve their children's ties to their native culture and language and to participate in their children's education and school activities.
7. Expand programs designed specifically to support the integration of immigrant women who often face additional barriers and, conversely, perform most of the unpaid work contributing to their family's socio-economic adaptation.
8. Declare Latinos and newcomers' lack of access to health insurance a health and socio-economic crisis and implement programs to address this serious problem.
7. Increase bilingual language training opportunities and the hiring and promotion of bilingual staff.
8. Invest in neighborhoods, housing, libraries, recreational facilities and multicultural programs which, together, can create a welcoming environment in areas where newcomers tend to settle.
9. Introduce new mechanisms for monitoring local and non-local law enforcement agencies dealing with newcomer populations to prevent practices that may violate civil rights and ultimately undermine the state's efforts to retain newcomers.
10. Support the development of innovative programs that promote integration and educational excellence among Latino students in higher education.
11. Promote programs that capitalize on newcomers' entrepreneurial spirit and help rebuild or expand small business sectors in our communities.
12. Support programs and policies aimed at including Latinos in the political process and enhancing their political, education and leadership capacities.



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